

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1994**

YOUNG MEN FROM GOOD FAMILIES

(Aunt Lilian)

My Aunt Lilian was the only member of my mother's family who did not marry. Her twin sibling, a boy, died at their birth in about 1878. Aunt Lilian was always a very strong woman physically. My grandfather used to say, rather unkindly that Lilian had got the strength but her twin had probably got the brains because Lilian didn't have any.

Nobody ever called my Aunt Lilian clever. But she was good-natured, kind, gay, good-looking when young, completely devoid of jealousy or malice, and with an infinite capacity for love. It was Aunt Lilian who gave my sister and me, and our daughters years later, our first wonderful dolls with their beautiful clothes. She herself sublimated her love for the babies she never had by lavishing it on a series of large dogs she always kept — and on us.

She certainly had admirers when she was young and beautiful, but she never married. This was sad, because if ever a woman was meant to be a loving helpmate in the true Victorian tradition, and bear her husband lots of much-loved children, it was my Aunt Lilian.

This was not to be, and Aunt Lilian was the daughter who stayed at home and looked after her Papa. When he died he left her the family house in Dunedin, and a small income for life. Her tastes were simple and inexpensive, and she asked for nothing more

I lived in Melbourne until I was nearly 18, by which time my mother had died, my father had acquired his new wife who found me trying, and it was decided that I should be sent back to New Zealand to live with my unmarried aunt in Dunedin. So I stayed two memorable years with my Aunt Lilian.

She was an amazing lady, blissfully, or perhaps knowingly and uncaringly, oblivious of the small-town values of the narrow, snobbish, provincial society of a colonial city like pre-war Dunedin. To the embarrassment of her priggish relations (which sometimes, I admit with shame, included me), she broke most of the rules nearly every day, laughed her rich, fat belly laugh and got away with it. Aunt Lilian was always her own person, perfectly sure of herself. She would wear gloves when she went out, because "a lady always wore gloves", but didn't care that they were grubby and full of holes. her hair was usually wild and untidy, her clothes startling.

Broader minded people than us, her immediate nearest and dearest, looked upon her with tolerant affection. I think now that Aunt Lilian knew she was a genuine Dunedin eccentric, a "character", and enjoyed it, quietly playing up to the role. She no problems. We, her critics, were the ones with the problems.

And how else but as an eccentric should one view an elderly spinster who

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had been known to trim the edges of her front lawns with dressmaking scissors when she happened to mislay her shears?

Aunt Lilian wore brilliantly coloured sack-like dresses she made herself out of two lengths of material seamed down the sides, with a scoop out of the top for the neckline which she then turned in and embroidered with rows of chain-stitching or drawn threadwork. She had countless long strings of beads of many colours hanging by her dressing-table mirror, and these she chose with care each day. Her grey hair, once thick, black and lustrous, had become thin and wispy with middle age, and her first action each morning was to jam on her head one of several large, shapeless straw hats decorated with flowers and bunches of cherries. She wore her hat all day and usually during the evening too, until she went to bed.

She loved to embroider, especially with wool. A charity in London's East End known as the West Ham Mission was enterprising enough to extend its tentacles into the colonies even as far as New Zealand, and every month Aunt Lilian would meet with other ladies at a sewing circle known as The Stocking League, where they would make extraordinary garments from black woollen stockings for the needy of West Ham. Aunt Lilian's specialty was turning the stockings into singlets for babies. She decorated them with brightly coloured wools in satin-stitch flowers. I do indeed wonder what the East Enders thought of those dreadful garments.

When I first arrived in Dunedin I knew very few young people, and was taken aback to find that I had to "belong" to some young man or other before I could meet any others. I was used to the much more relaxed and casual acquaintance one made on the Melbourne beaches at weekends. I allowed myself to be at least temporarily attached to this or that one, and did, in fact, have quite a gay time, going to lots of parties and dances. Aunt Lilian liked to quiz me about who I had been with, or met, the night before, when I made toast for her at the gas fire in her bedroom every morning. As all my romantic encounters were really quite innocent in those days, I held nothing back. Her comments were usually something like, "Jim MacMahon? Oh, that will be Robert MacMahon's son. Good! He's from a good family."

These innocent flutters did not mean that goodlooking young girls like me were not occasionally importuned. I would be completely outraged at the cheek of such a person! He would most certainly get the brush off, for good.

One afternoon I came home to find Aunt Lilian entertaining, with obvious enthusiasm, one Bill Stanton. He was a wolf, as we used to call them. Very much to be avoided.

"Oh, Dorothy, here is nice Mr. Stanton to see you! He wants to take you to a party at his home tonight. Isn't that kind! I told him you were free!"

I could have killed Aunt Lilian. No way would I have accepted this invitation

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had it come direct to me, but Bill had won round Aunt Lilian first. I suspected strongly what turned out to be true — that Bill Stanton's family were away, and his huge house empty, perfect for the importuning of young females. But I found myself forced to accept the invitation.

Bill left, promising to return for me later. Aunt Lilian assured me that Bill Stanton was from one of the very best, top-drawer families, and she was delighted that I was invited to his home. I could not tell her what I feared would happen. She would have refused to believe me. "There must be some mistake, dear." she would have said.

I went to Bill Stanton's party, and it was just the set-up I expected. I forget the details, but I do remember that at 2 a.m., when Bill (still unsuccessful but trying hard) had left me to go to the kitchen for more beer, I climbed out of a first floor window, slid down the Virginia creeper to the Garden below, and stomped home alone, absolutely furious. What humiliation! Aunt Lilian and the "nice young men of good families", indeed!

Aunt Lilian had a shabby old beach cottage at Brighton where she and I spent many happy weekends, with her big collie dog Laddie. We shared a huge, sagging double bed with worn-out wires and a feather mattress, and I had to perch on one edge to avoid falling into the enormous hole in the middle made by fat Aunt Lilian. One night I fell in, and the bed collapsed. Aunt Lilian laughed so much she could not get out.

There were always lots of ad hoc beach parties at Brighton in summer. The best families all had beach cottages, and the nice young men who belonged to them were usually around with their friends to entertain girls like me.

One day Aunt Lilian said to me, "I wonder if you would mind going up the road to the Hamptons' house, dear, and bring back a commode?"

"A *what?*" I cried in shock.

"A commode, dear. I need it. It isn't easy for me to get to the lavatory outside in the middle of the night, you know."

I was prudishly shocked, of course. It never occurs to young Miss Nineteen that when she is old Mrs. Seventy she, too, might need to relieve herself in the middle of the night.

"Do go along after lunch, dear. They're expecting you."

I was far from pleased, but I went. I walked the hundred yards up the road to the house and was duly handed the offending article. It weighed half a ton. China chamber pots in those days were thick and heavy. It was a clumsy thing to carry,

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and I was embarrassed because by no stretch of the imagination could it be mistaken for an ordinary chair. It looked like what it was. A commode.

While struggling back along the road I saw three young men coming towards me on a collision course. I recognised them. They were nice young men of Dunedin's "good families" whom I knew. They were obviously coming to call on me.

I went hot and cold with horror. I could not possibly meet them with a commode to explain away. My ladylike aplomb would be ruined. It had to disappear over the next 25 yards. But where? How?

The boys had seen me. They were actually moving towards me with welcoming smiles as though to relieve me of my burden. This most certainly must not happen!

I managed to hurry so that we all actually met at the gate of the cottage. Thereupon I promptly put down the commode and sat on it.

The boys looked a little surprised at not being invited into the cottage. They probably thought I was as odd as my well-known eccentric aunt, sitting down at the front gate holding court virtually on the road. But no way would I rise from that seat.

At last they went away, having made an arrangement to meet me later on the beach. I wondered if they knew my secret. At 19 I could not bear the thought that they might actually think it was really for me!

It all amuses me now. But in those days we carefully brought up girls were ridiculously prim and prudish. We had hard and fast rules about what was socially acceptable and what was not.

Aunt Lilian was obviously much less prudish about loos than I was, because in Dunedin she also had an outside loo, though a more respectable model than the one at the Brighton cottage, and she had papered the walls and ceiling of this little outhouse with colour advertisements from the many glossy illustrated magazines of the time. These were beautiful ladies — pin-up girls, in fact. At night one needed to light a candle to see these amazing sights and I thought the whole sub-standard set-up was appalling. Substandard it may have been; but original and amusing it certainly was. A fabulous loo! But I was deeply ashamed of it.

My friend Betty and I entertained our young friends at impromptu parties at Aunt Lilian's house when she was at Brighton and I, for some reason, was not. Nothing very disreputable happened. We girls were astonishingly respectable in those days. We were probably just plain scared. I know I was. However, we would often see the boys off the premises at 6 a.m. in brilliant sunshine, with their empty beer barrel, and this was shocking behaviour enough in 1938. What would the neighbours say!

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The boys would ask me discreetly where the loo was. I told them to use the hydrangea bush in the front garden. They did.

At the end of that summer Aunt Lilian came home and the hydrangeas came out. Aunt Lilian was amazed.

"I can't understand it!" she said. "For 40 years those hydrangeas have been white. All of a sudden they've turned blue; I wonder what could have happened?"

I wonder!

Dear Aunt Lilian, in her dirty but charming old house with the floorboards gone at the top end of the hall, carpet suspended over a vacuum. Aunt Lilian with her passion for pretty things — necklaces, floral patterned china cups and saucers. Aunt Lilian with her procession of adored and adoring stray dogs which left countless hairs behind on the window seat in the dining room. Aunt Lilian eating a bacon and egg supper from newspaper on the kitchen table, overcome with embarrassment when someone from one of Dunedin's "good" families came to collect me for a party and insisted on seeking her out to pay his respects. Aunt Lilian training ivy which had crept through the window into her drawing room round the wall, because it looked so pretty. And above all, Aunt Lilian with her sense of fun, tears running down her cheeks with laughter at something that amused her.

I left Dunedin when I was 20, returning three years later with a husband and babies.

Aunt Lilian adored our children, and they loved her dearly. Unfortunately my husband did not fall under the gypsy charm of my easygoing aunt, and resented her careless, grubby ways with babies. Germs! To avoid wrathful scenes I felt I had to keep her away as much as possible.

In this, of course, I was wrong. There are worse things than germs. Our children could have resisted the germs. When I held back on her visits I deprived them of something very important, very precious and actually quite rare.

They loved Aunt Lilian, and she loved them. I also did not appreciate how much she loved me, myself. When she died that, sadly, was made plain.

In her seventies Aunt Lilian became diabetic. She could not administer her insulin injections properly, having become partly blind, so it was arranged that somebody should live in the house with her. We called such people "companions".

There was a procession of companions, not all of whom liked dogs; and poor Aunt, Lilian was quite miserable with all of them. She just could not bear to share her beloved home with anyone else.

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They came and they went. One day when nobody was there Aunt Lilian went into a diabetic coma, and was taken to hospital. Her brother, my uncle, who took major decisions on her behalf, decided she must not be allowed to go home, as she could not look after herself properly alone. If her house was sold quietly, while she was in hospital, he thought, she would have to agree to be sent to a Home when she recovered. He sold it.

Aunt Lilian signed the necessary documents brought to her hospital bed. And then she just turned her face to the wall, and died. I believe she died of a broken heart.

The last time I saw her alive, nobody would have thought she was so near the end. After half an hour sitting beside her in the ward I rose to leave.

"Don't go, darling! Don't go!" she pleaded, tears in her eyes.

But I didn't listen. I put my arm forward on the bed so that I could kiss her on the cheek, and she grabbed it in a vice-like grip. I tried to pull away, muttering soothing words, but she wouldn't let go. In slight panic I slipped out of my jacket, Aunt Lilian still holding tightly to the sleeve. I moved quickly to the door, turned back and waved goodbye. Aunt Lilian was weeping bitterly.

She died that night. The nurse said she refused to let go of the sleeve of my jacket. She held it tightly until she became too weak to hold it any more.